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# Policy Memo

**DATE:** April 8, 2010

**SUBJECT:** The United Nations and the G-20: Ensuring Complementary Efforts

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In little more than a year, the G-20 has emerged as a vital summit-level forum for leaders to coordinate international economic policy. The global financial crisis drove home the need for consultations among a wider set of key economic players, more representative of 21st-century realities than the earlier G-8 club of predominately Western industrialized nations.

This development raises important questions about the future shape of the international system and multilateral cooperation. It is increasingly clear that diplomatic cooperation will be multi-multilateral—with an intricate web of different intergovernmental forums and mechanisms. If multilateral cooperation is to fulfill its purpose of solving problems and spreading peace and justice around the world, governments and their leaders must mobilize and harmonize the capabilities of the intergovernmental instruments at their disposal.

The Stanley Foundation's 41st United Nations Issues Conference convened some 35 governmental and nongovernmental officials near New York on March 26-28, 2010, to discuss effective collaboration between the United Nations and the G-20 heads of state summits and preparatory processes. Participants included UN officials, diplomats from a number of countries, and global governance specialists.

Highlights and key observations from the discussion follow:

- Participants stressed that the United Nations and the G-20 are not and should not be perceived as being in rivalry with one another, even though some suggest they are competing to be the center of global diplomacy. The two differ sharply, particularly in the contrast between a treaty-based institution and an informal series of consultations, making for a natural division of labor and roles. Each offers strengths and advantages that complement the other.
- Participants raised a fundamental question about the future trajectory of the G-20. Will this grouping of influential nations undergo further significant evolution, or has it reached stasis? Most expected change, and one urged everyone to think of it as a “G-x” process that encompasses variable geometry with different groupings and consultations.
- One major contrast is between the UN's universal membership and the exclusivity of the G-20 and other G groupings. Universal membership offers advantages in many situations. Yet, many conference participants affirmed advantages associated with the G-20's restricted membership. Some noted that the G-20 members represent 85 percent of global

GDP and two-thirds of the world's population. The G-20 also has a strong legitimacy claim based on its response to the global financial crisis and success in averting a global depression, widely recognized as beyond the capacity of any other multilateral body.

- The G-20 also brings together established and emerging powers, indeed with greater equality of status than the UN Security Council, with its two tiers of permanent and elected members. One conference participant suggested that this spurs governments to a new sense of international responsibility, and another noted that G-20 policy actions tend to have a high degree of “ownership” among its members.
- Several participants argued that the changing multilateral cooperative landscape presents an opportunity to improve and highlight the unique contributions of the United Nations. Among other things, the G-20's explicit acknowledgment of a change in global power realities underscores the ongoing need for reform of the UN Security Council.
- The limited membership of the G-x imposes operational demands for robust consultative links between the G-20 and the remaining “G-172” other UN member states. The G-20's informal and largely ad hoc engagement with outside stakeholders raises concerns for those without a seat at the table.
- While some key G-20 countries have consulted with other UN member states, both in New York and national capitals, participants suggested that such consultations should be more intentional, consistent, and transparent to ensure that the voices of all relevant stakeholders are heard. At the United Nations, the informal Global Governance Group (3G) maintains an ongoing focus on the nexus between the two forums. Participants noted the G-20 countries are also UN member states, so there shouldn't be “us-and-them” perceptions.
- Conference participants took care not to place an undue burden on the secretary-general to embody the concerns of the entire UN membership, but stressed that he serves as an important operational link to the G-20. Conference discussion also identified UN offices that could represent the world body at G-20 preparatory consultations: the office of the secretary-general for sherpa meetings, head of UNDP for finance ministers, and under secretary-general for Political Affairs for foreign ministers.
- Participants suggested UN intersections at the “front end” and “back end” of the G-x process—helping to shape its agenda and assisting with follow-through. For example, they emphasized the analytical capacities of the United Nations and Bretton Woods Institutions staff, currently studying the impact of the economic downturn on the world's poorest.
- And from the G-20 vantage, a participant reported that summit planners evaluate potential agenda items in terms of best channels to achieve intended tangible action. These ideas provide a useful overall framework for complementary relationships—i.e., to think of a dynamic shifting of “the action” among different multilateral forums for agenda setting, analysis, policy development, consensus building, and implementation.
- While the role of the G-20 on the global economic and financial agenda has enjoyed a high profile, the relationship between the G-x process and political and security affairs and other transnational challenges is less clear. Participants recognized that heads of state can and will speak about any number of issues at G-x fora and that current international crises

would likely influence topics explored. However, they were not of one mind about the merits of expanding the usual G-20 agenda beyond economic and financial matters.

- Those favoring G-20 agenda expansion stressed that the Security Council's comparative advantages make it easy to avoid direct competition. Given the council's legal authorities, established patterns of action, and year-round sessions, it would not make sense for the Gs to try to duplicate functions such as initiating peacekeeping missions, mediation efforts, or investigations or passing judgment on a state's actions. This leaves plenty of room for the G-x to use appropriate levers to make other kinds of contributions toward non-economic issues. Illustrative examples are the G-8-sponsored Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction, a program by which donor countries underwrite the destruction and disposal of WMD, and the Global Initiative to Counter Nuclear Terrorism, a transgovernmental network to develop best practices to clamp down on nuclear smuggling.
- The December 2009 Copenhagen conference triggered discussion of international cooperation on climate change. Given the scale of change needed to move toward post-carbon economies, and the associated political challenges, participants stressed that commensurate diplomatic and policy pushes will be required. In other words, the level of preparatory effort that went into Copenhagen was not sufficient to produce climate change solutions. One participant cited the lengthy post-World War II meetings of foreign ministers that crafted the Bretton Woods Institutions as indicative of the work required.
- The conference discussions suggested a helpful role for G-x configurations in political and policy consensus building. It was noted that small groups within the United Nations often gather to develop policy ideas and proposals, and the G-x is uniquely suited to fill a catalytic function at the highest level of international leadership.
- Regarding the multilateral agenda, while world leaders can discuss whatever they choose, one conference participant emphasized that it is actually the leaders' duty to follow the full range of issues and mobilize the best instruments to deal with them.

### **Full Report to Follow**

A more comprehensive report about this conference and its major recommendations will follow in a few weeks.

The analysis and recommendations included in this Policy Memo do not necessarily reflect the view of the Stanley Foundation or any of the conference participants, but rather draw upon the major strands of discussion put forward at the event. Participants neither reviewed nor approved this document. Therefore, it should not be assumed that every participant subscribes to all of its recommendations, observations, and conclusions.

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The Stanley Foundation seeks a secure peace with freedom and justice, built on world citizenship and effective global governance. It brings fresh voices, original ideas, and lasting solutions to debates on global and regional problems. The foundation is a nonpartisan, private operating foundation, located in Muscatine, Iowa, that focuses on peace and security issues and advocates principled multilateralism. The foundation frequently collaborates with other organizations. It does not make grants. Online at [www.stanleyfoundation.org](http://www.stanleyfoundation.org).